

## **Palm Beach Post (Florida)**

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### **WRONG DRIVER ON FUEL EFFICIENCY**

Apparently, Congress has noticed \$3-a-gallon gas prices and decided to do something about them.

Doing nothing is unacceptable because Congress also has noticed the November elections, and there is great angst in Washington over what Americans will be thinking when they drive to the polls. Only a few things make Americans think more than watching the relative speeds of the flashing numbers on the gas pump.

Last week, a House committee voted to give the Bush administration the authority to set mileage targets for passenger cars. Republicans on the Energy and Commerce Committee were able to turn back an attempt by Democrats to require higher fuel efficiency standards, rather than defer to the White House.

Congress hasn't done much about gas mileage since 1975 when it enacted Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards and doubled the requirements on new vehicles in response to the OPEC oil embargo. The United States has saved 3 million barrels of oil per day ever since. Automakers must meet a CAFE fleet-wide average for passenger cars of 27.5 miles per gallon, a figure largely unchanged for the past 20 years.

It is a failure of government that Americans are burning gasoline as if it were 1986, despite remarkable technological advances to most every component of today's autos. Instead of using technology to improve efficiency, the industry has used it to make vehicles bigger, heavier and more lucrative to sell. The high profit margins on sport utility vehicles -- with the most forgiving efficiency standards -- have made efficiency an afterthought within the industry, instead of the priority it was 30 years ago.

The potential impact of better gas mileage is huge. According to the Sierra Club, if all the nation's vehicles averaged 40 miles per gallon -- which is within reach -- we would save more than 3 million barrels of oil each day. That is more oil than the United States imports from the Persian Gulf and could ever extract from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, combined. And getting 40 mpg would cut global warming pollution by 600 million tons a year and save consumers more than \$45 billion each year at the pump.

Even a modest improvement in fuel efficiency would bring significant benefits. Yet, the House committee rejected the proven system and decided instead to turn control to a White House that has allowed the oil and auto industries to write its energy policy.

Early this year, the administration had suggested that it was willing to support a major raise in mileage requirements for SUVs and pickup trucks. When the new rule came down, however, it called for increasing the mileage on those vehicles by 1.8 mpg to 24 mpg by the 2011 model year. You could hear the high-fives slapping in Detroit all the way to downtown Grand Rapids.

The White House still believes that conservation is a "personal virtue," and that Americans suffer from an incurable "oil addiction" that they're just going to have to live with.

Opposition from Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta kept the committee from imposing tougher mileage requirements. Mr. Mineta, who has pleaded with lawmakers for the power to overhaul CAFE, argues that stricter standards would force the industry to put more smaller, lighter, fuel-efficient cars on the road, and that would put more people at risk in accidents. The government wants to protect you from the horror of driving your Mini Cooper into the path of a Chevy Suburban, and that'll cost you \$3 a gallon.

But really, the White House is more concerned about protecting General Motors and Ford from complications while they're trying to restructure themselves to profitability. It is one cause that unites Republicans with many Democrats.

Mr. Mineta admits that his plan to reform CAFE won't do anything about the pain at the pumps. In fact, changes won't even take effect for three years. The full House is expected to approve the transfer of authority to the administration, and the Senate is expected to approve it, too.

What Congress has decided to do about high gas prices is to turn them over to the White House. Think about that when you're driving to the polls.

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